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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the need for a more systematic framework for conceptualizing and evaluating the health-related effects of support. A conceptual model of stress, support, and functioning is presented which clarifies the direct, interactive, and indirect effects of social support. Several paths representing relationships among life stressors, support, and functioning are presented, including: (1) the adverse effect of stressors on functioning; (2) the direct effect of support on functioning, not contingent on stress levels; (3) the interactive effect of support as a conditioner of the stress-functioning relationship; (4) the indirect effects of support on the occurrence and appraisal of stressful life events; and (5) the effect of stress on influencing the availability of support. Each of these relationships is illustrated with current research results, that suggest mixed evidence for direct and interactive effects, while noting that indirect effects have received little attention. The implications of concepts of support for prevention efforts are also discussed along with the need to consider the varied effects of support in designing prevention programs. (Author/NRB)

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SOCIAL SUPPORT AND WELL-BEING:
RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTION PROGRAMS

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The potential connection between social support and health has attracted interest among both researchers and prevention-oriented practioners. Primary and secondary prevention efforts have been implemented on the assumption that increasing the supportiveness of informal social networks can have beneficial effects on individuals' present and future well-being. Despite widespread endorsement of the benefits of social support, there is considerable ambiguity in the conceptualization and measurement of the mechanisms through which support affects health.

Interventions which seek to increase the supportive relationships of a group of individuals or to foster the helping skills of community "gatekeepers" who in turn provide support to others seem to assume that support has a direct effect on functioning, i.e., that increases in support will have generally beneficial effects for those involved (Conter, et al., 1980; D'Augelli, et al., in press; Merzer, et al., 1980). Other interventions which are aimed at "high stress" groups (e.g., divorced, bereaved, acutely ill) seem to assume an interactive or conditioning effect, i.e., that the effects of social support will be salient primarily under heightened stress levels (Felner, et al., 1980; Vachon, 1980). Similarly, researchers, through their selection of samples and methods, have often failed to distinguish between the direct and the interactive effects of support producing some ambiguous findings. Finally, conclusions drawn about support from prevention and research programs considering the direct or interactive effects of support (or both) fail to consider the indirect effects; support decreases the probability of occurrence and perceived stressfulness of life events.

Hence, there is a need for a more systematic framework for conceptualizing and evaluating the health-related effects of support. We take a step in this direction by presenting a model which clarifies the direct, interactive, and

indirect effects of social support and by illustrating these mechanisms with current research results. We then consider the implications of this model in the design of social support interventions.

Conceptual Model

A general model of the interrelationships between life stressors, support, and functioning is presented in Figure 1. Although Path A, the potentially adverse affect of stressors on functioning, is well documented (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974), the low to moderate strength of the obtained correlations as well as individual variability in response to stressors provided much of the impetus for considering mediating variables such as social support. Path B shows that support may have a direct effect on functioning which is not contingent on stress levels. Path C represents the effect of support as a "conditioner" of the stress-functioning relationship. This mechanism, often labelled the "stress-buffering" effect, suggests that a relationship between support and functioning will be observed only for persons under stress. Statistically, this relationship may be evaluated with an interaction term. In addition, there are potentially important indirect effects of support on functioning. Path D indicates that different patterns of social networks and support may influence the occurrence and appraisal of stressful life events while, in turn, Path E shows that either acute or chronic stress may influence the availability of support. We consider next the status of research on each of these relationships.

Direct effects: Path B

Path B, the direct effect of support on functioning, denotes a relationship which is independent of the level of stress. Here again, the evidence for such an effect is equivocal. A direct effect of support on functioning is reported in several studies of community samples (Andrews, et al., 1978; Lin, et al., 1979; Schaeffer, et al., in press), but no such result was found by Wilcox (in

press) in a community sample or in several other studies on different populations (Nuckolls, et al., 1972; Sandler & Barrera, 1980). Existing research designs do not always permit distinguishing between direct and interactive effects. For instance, focusing on only a high stress group (e.g., Hirsch, 1980; Nuckolls, et al., 1972) may identify direct but fail to identify indirect effects. Finding a direct effect among a high stress group may also imply an interactive effect (i.e., support relates to functioning only under stress), since there might be no direct effect in a low stress but otherwise comparable group. Although the positive benefits of high support have received the most attention, low support may also actively contribute to poor health (e.g., Myers, et al., 1975).

Interactive effects: Path C

Following several theoretical presentations (Cassel, 1974; Caplan, 1974; Cobb, 1976) and early empirical work (Nuckolls, et al., 1972), Path C, the "stress-buffering" role of social support has received considerable attention. As can be seen in the hypothetical results presented in Figure 2, support is related to functioning only for those under stress. The assumption that the major effect of support is to moderate the impact of stress underlies many research and prevention programs. For instance, Wilcox (in press) found that community members who had less support while under stress were more likely to display symptoms than were those with higher levels of support. For those under lower stress, support was not related to functioning. Evidence for this interactive effect is not clear-cut though. While evidence for the buffering effect has been found by some (Billings & Moos, in press; Eaton, 1978; LaRocco, et al., 1980; Sandler & Barrera, 1980), there is no support for such an interactive effect in other studies (Andrews, et al., 1978; LaRocco & Jones, 1978; Lin, et al., 1979). Some of these inconsistencies may occur because specific types of support have specific kinds of effects. For example, stress associated with

one's job may be more effectively buffered by support from coworkers than by familial support (LaRocco, et al., 1980). Finally, an additional deleterious effect of low support may lie in its capacity to exacerbate the negative effects of stress.

Effects of support on stressors: Path D

Support may affect functioning indirectly by influencing the number of life events the individual experiences and by mediating the appraisal of the severity or threat of such events. Gore (1978) found that persons who enjoyed high social support perceived less financial stress associated with job loss than did the unsupported, even though there was no difference on an objective measure of economic hardship. LaRocco et al, (1980) reported that support by coworkers decreased perceived job stress. Support may also reduce the occurrence of stressful events. For example, increased social resources may help resolve problems (e.g., marital conflict) before they become major events (e.g., separation or divorce). Granovetter (1973) found that the number of "weak" ties or casual acquaintances available to utilize in a job search process was directly related to finding a job and ending the stress of unemployment. In a longitudinal analysis, persons with high levels of support consistently experienced fewer negative life events than persons with low levels of support (Billings & Moos, 1981).

Effects of stress on support: Path E

Life events may increase or decrease social support, depending upon the type of stress and support under consideration. Discrete life events may cause some individuals to mobilize their social networks, thereby increasing the number of supportive behaviors or transactions reported by the individual. This may account for positive relationships between stress and contact with network members

(Carveth & Gottlieb, 1979) and the experience of supportive behaviors (Sandler & Barrera, 1980). Chronic life strains, or events which entail the loss or limiting of access to important figures, may reduce support. Schaeffer et al. (1980) found that people who experienced more loss events felt they had less social support. In fact, some life events may have an impact on functioning through the diminishing of social support. This methodological imprecision in distinguishing stress from social support confounds the stressor-functioning relationship (Fontana, et al., 1980).

Overall, some of the inconsistency among findings on these mechanisms may be attributed to differences in (a) types of outcomes examined (i.e., physical vs psychological); (b) sources and dimensions of support studied; and, (c) the nature and content of the stresses involved. However, a more complete discussion of the effective dimensions and operationalizations of each component of this model, while of considerable importance, is beyond the scope of this paper (c.f. Ilfeld, 1977; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Mitchell & Trickett, 1980).

Program Implications

Practitioners and researchers need to develop a more comprehensive consideration of the interrelationships of stress, support, and functioning. In the field of prevention, there is a conceptual shift from "deficit" models of mental and physical health towards "wellness" models and an emphasis on promoting healthful practices at both individual and community levels (cf. Price, et al., 1980; Rappaport, in press). Concepts of social support which focus on informal social relationships are compatible with these ideological changes. Future interventions need to critically examine direct, interactive, and indirect effects of support in order to develop an understanding of the relative strength of each of these support mechanisms for various populations and risk factors.

We have outlined some tentative empirical evidence for the existence of

direct and interactive effects of social support. To the extent that such effects exist, primary and secondary prevention efforts which seek to bolster either the direct or interactive aspects of social support may have positive impacts. Primary intervention programs might focus on the direct effects of support by promoting general social competencies necessary to develop supportive networks. The success of such programs should not depend on the selection of high stress or specific "at risk" populations. Our review of direct effects also suggests that prevention programs might focus on persons with low support, whether or not they are currently under stress. Many persons in this group are already functioning at lower levels and are particularly vulnerable to stress. However, the question of whether such programs will enhance network resources or provide the skills to utilize such resources during personal crises and thereby maximize the interactive effects of support under stress cannot yet be answered. Secondary prevention programs which select high stress groups for training in skills directly related to handling the stressor and to utilizing effectively relevant social network resources (e.g., job clubs, bereavement programs) may maximize the stress-buffering role of support. A lack of clarity about intended support mechanisms in formulating programs will limit their effectiveness.

The designers of support-oriented interventions might also consider the indirect effects of support we have identified. Interventions can increase their effectiveness by reducing or preventing the development of various risk factors. Such attention might be directed at social network dimensions which mediate the appraisal of the stress and threat levels of life events, as well as at factors that reduce the occurrence of such events. In comparison with other mechanisms, the indirect effects of support may be less dramatic in the short-term but produce

more enduring benefits. Present research and practice does not yet clearly show when (or how) prevention programs might most effectively capitalize on the various support mechanisms.

As is true of most models, the framework presented here is a simplification of a complex behavioral system. Additional independent and conditioning variables such as coping responses to stressful events will need to be considered in future development and evaluation of prevention programs. Also, many programs are aimed at individuals rather than at their social network or at more general levels of social organization. There is some evidence that interventions at the network level may affect the members' utilization of both informal and professional prevention resources (Gottlieb & Hall, 1980). Contextual factors which might indicate when the goals of an intervention are best served by focusing on either the individual or on the social climates of various environments remains to be explored. Clarifying the intended support mechanisms through which interventions will achieve their goals and tailoring programmatic content to specifically tap these mechanisms is a challenge to program designers.

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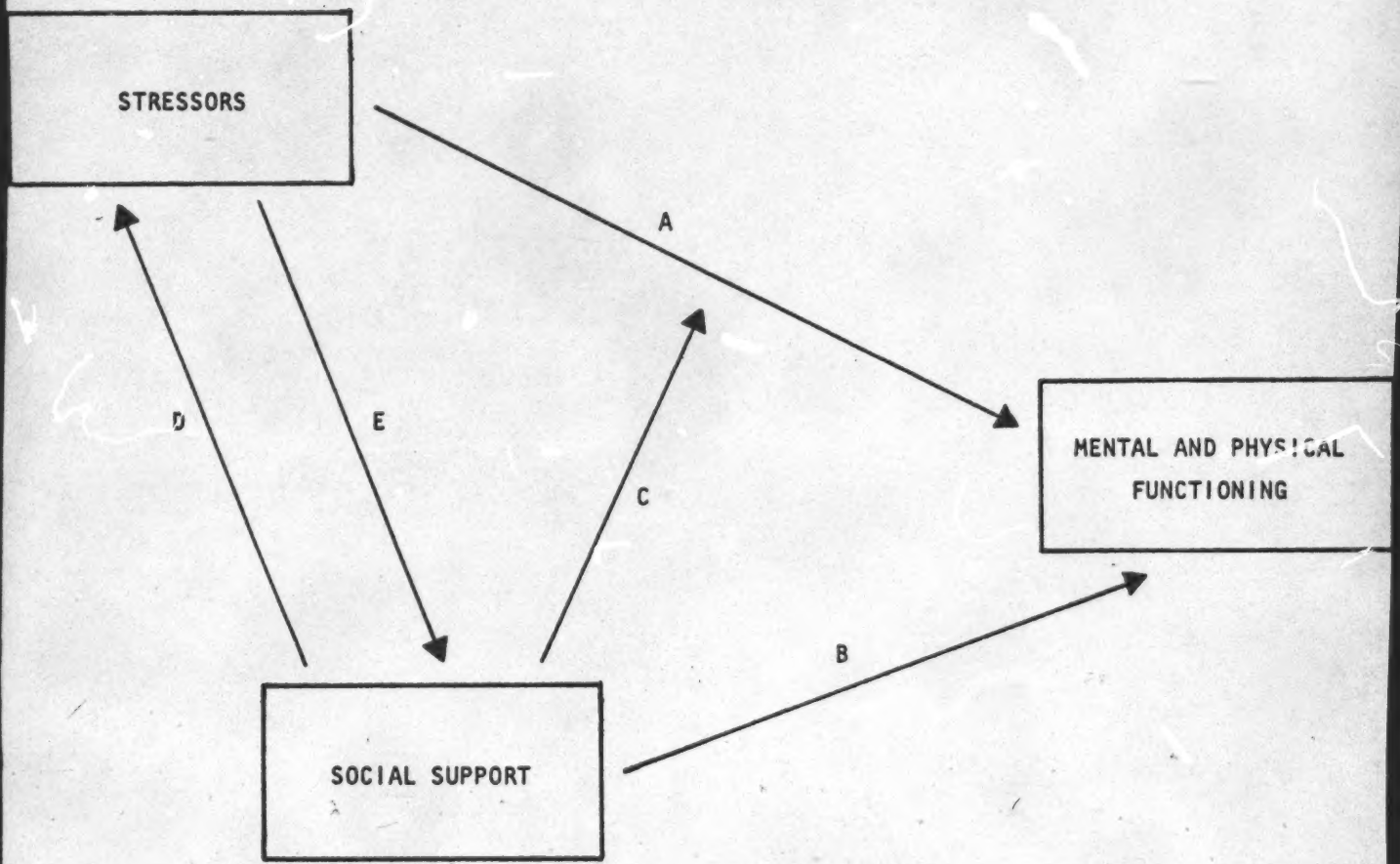

Figure 1. A model of the interrelationships between life stressors, social support and personal functioning.

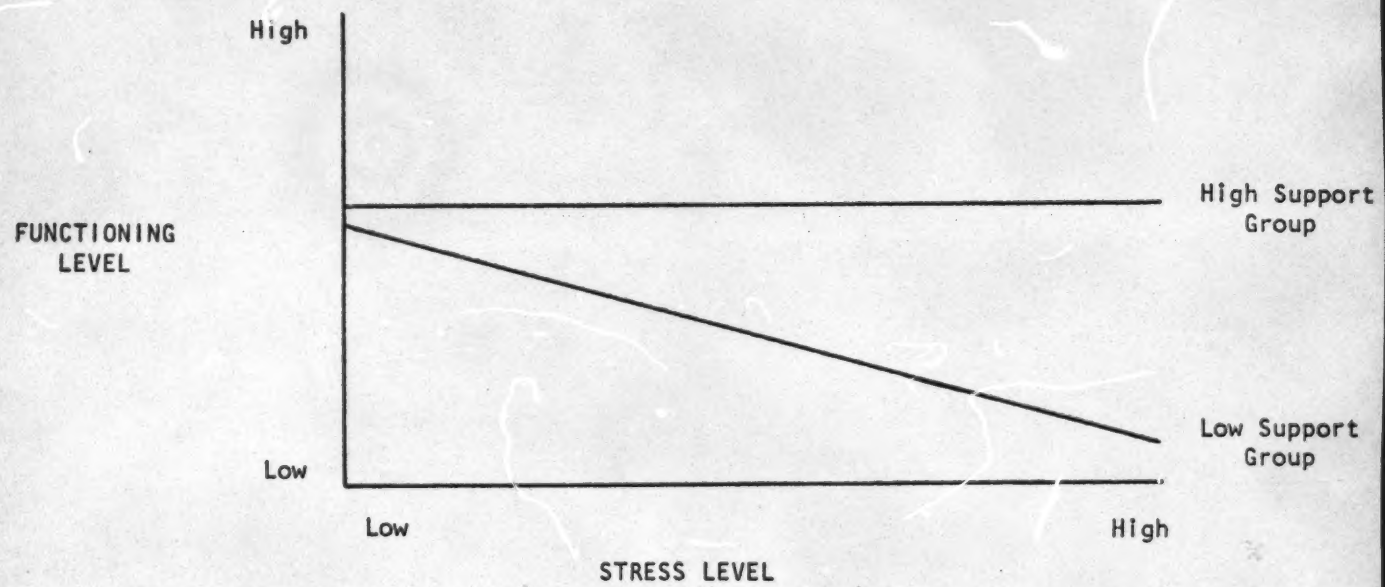

Figure 2. Hypothetical interactive effect of social support on relationship between stressors and functioning.